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SUBJECT: DAY OF PROTESTS LARGEY QUIET, BUT VIOLENT CLASH
ERUPTS IN NILE DELTA

REF: CAIRO 563

Summary

1.(SBU) A heavy and active security presence largely quelled a planned April 6 national day of protests, but fatal clashes between police and protestors erupted in the Nile Delta mill town of Mehalla el Kobra. Whether due to calls by protest organizers to stay home, worry over potential public disorder, or the arrival of a seasonal sandstorm, many Egyptian university students nonetheless refrained from attending class, and Cairo's streets were noticeably emptier than usual. End summary.

A Day of Protest

¶2. (SBU) Despite calls by labor activists and many opposition groups for a nationwide day of strikes and protests on April 6, heavy security intervention and stern warnings from the Ministry of Interior appear to have kept outward displays of protest to a minimum. Violent clashes between police and protestors did occur, however, in the Nile Delta textile town of Mehalla el Kobra, leading to at least two deaths and an undetermined number of arrests. Textile workers at the public Ghazl el Mehalla (aka Mehalla Spinning and Weaving) textile factory originally conceived the day of protests as a means to further their calls for an increased minimum wage and to criticize rising prices of basic commodities (reftel), but other opposition groups such as the Kefaya movement soon joined the call to highlight their own grievances with the Mubarak government. In recent years Mehalla el Kobra has been the epicenter of mass, illegal strikes against Egypt's public textile factories as well as the proving ground for an emerging independent labor leadership.

Violence in Mehalla

¶3. (SBU) Although an intense security presence inside the factory had snuffed out plans for a mass strike at the Ghazl el Mehalla textile factory, it did not prevent violent clashes between police and protesters from erupting on the streets of the town. Under heavy pressure from the GOE, senior Mehalla labor leaders had agreed to halt their strike plans despite the desire of some workers to carry on with the protest. It is unclear what or who precipitated the violence, but sometime between 3 and 4pm (coinciding with the shift change at the factory), confrontations erupted between police and protestors and Mehalla residents who were

gathering on a public square. Protestors hurled rocks at riot police who according to several activists responded with live fire and tear gas. (Photographs from the confrontation forwarded to NEA/ELA.)

¶4. (SBU) The Arab Committee for Human Rights issued a statement claiming that a 21-year-old man and 9-year-old boy were killed, although some labor activists claim that several more died in the clashes. One Mehalla labor activist told NGO contacts that while hiding out in the local hospital to evade arrest by the police, he heard from hospital staff that four had been killed in the rioting, including children. NGO contacts witnessed several shops being looted and set alight, as well as the demolition of a gas station.

A Day of Protests that Wasn't

¶5. (SBU) In Cairo, despite relatively small gatherings outside the lawyers' and press syndicate buildings, the mass gathering planned by opposition group Kefaya for Cairo's central square failed to materialize. Some contacts believe the early arrests of opposition and student activists, combined with stern warnings from the Ministry of Interior against joining in the illegal protests, as well as a heavy sandstorm, dampened public enthusiasm for the protests. The Muslim Brotherhood, arguably the most dynamic and popular opposition force in the country, announced in the days leading up to April 6 that it morally backed the strike, but did not plan to participate, as it had not been involved in its organization.

¶6. (SBU) An Amcit Arabic language student at the American University Cairo said that perhaps only 20% of her Egyptian

classmates were present, and she had heard that a number of professors had also stayed home. Press reports also note high student absenteeism at Cairo, Helwan, and Ain Shams universities. Traffic on Cairo's congested roadways seemed extraordinarily light throughout the day and early evening.
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